

Annual report-2020-21

Rise up Project (AAVAJ Project)

Prepared by

SAHELI HIV AIDS KARYAKARTA SANGH PUNE

C/O Peoples Health Organization 1089, Budhwar Peth, Opp. Shrinath Talkies, Pune- 411002. **Phone No.:** 020-24474993, **Email:** sahelisangha@gmail.com, **Website:** www.sahelisangha.org

Premise

About Saheli

Saheli is a Sex Worker's Collective. It was formed to bring women in sex work together to resolve their issues with a rights-based approach. Saheli, a community-based organization and the only Female Sex-Workers (FSWs) collective in Pune City. It was formed with 9 members, and today the collective is 1500 members strong and counting.

The People's Health Organization (PHO), established in the year 1991, created awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention and control amongst sex workers. After which multiple issues of sex worker's community were identified and a self-governing body run by and for women sex workers came into being. Thus, in the year 1998, Saheli was formed with the support of PHO.

Vision

Empowerment of women in sex work through Collectivization.

Mission

To enhance and enable a greater level of self-protection among women in sex work through a sense of community and identity.

Aim of the Project

Target Group:

100 Sex workers from Budhwar Peth.

Objective 1: Evidence gathering and documentation of arbitrary use of BPA with community participation for creating change of perception of and towards the female sex workers.

Completed Activities:

1. Saheli, visited brothels to study whether police intervened daily activities of the brothels. After visiting 200 Brothels (from around 400 brothels) and talking to approximately 500 sex workers and 100 brothel owners, we learned that police harassment prevails in brothels. We also collected some pieces of evidence of police harassment. The police issued a fine to women working in the brothel.

We interacted with the female sex workers and tried to understand their problems caused by the police operations at the brothels. Although, as per the law, women involved in business within the premises of a brothel are legal. Despite that police forcefully entered the brothels and imposed a fine on them, claiming that they were soliciting on the streets outside the brothel area. We gathered sufficient evidence to prove police harassment on female sex worker encounter. Saheli has photos of the receipts of the fine imposed on them by the police.

2. Saheli launched Social Media Campaign on the occasion of 'Legal Aid Day'. The purpose of this campaign was to initiate positive discussions between the community and the experts coming from various fields. It aimed at creating a platform and establishing an effective dialogue with the community. The experts invited were Sanket Deshpande (MaitraYuva Foundation, Pune), SanyogitaDhamdhare (social activist), VidhuPrabha (Rise-up Coordinator), TejaswiSevekari (Executive Director, Saheli Sangha, and Pune), Meena Koli, and MahadeviMadar (Saheli).

On this occasion, several issues were addressed such as the need for sex workers to unite and collectively fight the issues concerning police harassment, equal rights, and the need to effectively use social media. It particularly focused on the need to decriminalize adult consensual sex-work, to ensure sex worker's rights to livelihood and other labor rights by repealing the Bombay Police Act.

3. Saheli published pamphlets focusing on the concept of the campaign. These pamphlets were shared with the Maharashtra State Police and the Network of the organizations.

Social Media Campaign: Saheli Sangha published a pamphlet on the Bombay Police Act to make aware the women and civil society. The organization disseminated the pamphlets to sex workers

and society to raise the voice against the wrong implementation of the Bombay Police Act to harass women. The social media campaign will provide a platform in opening up a positive and effective dialogue with the Maharashtra State Police and the network of the organization to protect the rights of sex workers and a reduction in police harassment.

Impact – Women question police whether they are arrested from their home or while soliciting.

Outcome

1. The cases of police harassment in which women sex workers suffered violence inflicted by police had been documented. The experiences women shared related to police harassment were also documented in detail.
2. The community's active participation on the first day was very encouraging. About 1000 communities took advantage of the campaign. The campaign helped in creating awareness of the legal rights of the sex workers and empowered them to reduce police harassment.
3. Media coverage of the campaign helped in advocating decriminalization of adult consensual sex-work to ensure sex worker's rights to livelihood. It also emphasized other labor rights of the female sex workers by repealing The Bombay Police Act.

Objective 2: To form a project coalition with 5 other key organizations from Maharashtra that represent the different districts.

Completed Activities

1. The preliminary meeting with District Legal Services Aid (DLSA) was conducted. The basic introduction of the new members in the project was done with DLSA senior members. The further productive dialogue was planned to gain new insights.

Outcome

1. Established good rapport with partner organizations. A consultation workshop had been conducted with partner organizations and DLSA members.

Objective 3: Open a productive channel of dialogue with the head of the police department and coordinate with the state commission of women to pave the way for the IPS director to pass an order excluding sex workers from the Bombay Police Act, 1951.

Completed Activities

Meeting and basic interaction with Vaishali Chandgude, Senior Police Inspector and In-charge of Women and Social Security Cell and Anti-Trafficking Unit of Pune Police Commissioner Unit.

Outcome

Established good rapport and opening a positive channel

The most impactful activities that enabled the organization to meet EAR or to get closer to meeting your EAR.

Completed Activities:

1. Gathered pieces of evidence and documents related to the Sex workers arrested by police under the Bombay Police Act. These women were booked for conducting the sex work at the BudhwarPeth area. The documents collected were in form of the receipts of police harassment charges.
2. As a partner of the National Network of Sex Workers, Saheli had actively promoted and advocated the sex worker's rights as informal workers to the National Human Rights Commission. After community consultations, a submission was done to the NHRC through the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW). NHRC Advisory was released accepting five out of seven suggestions given by NNSW. Along with other national organizations, it voiced its perspective on sex worker's struggle and their rights in the local print media as well as social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It had also published handbills to build public awareness of the human rights of sex workers.
3. **Conducted Economic Impact Survey** concerning Covid -19 pandemic. The survey aimed at the understanding impact of lockdown on the lives of the sex workers living in Pune. It primarily covered issues related to their economic condition- income, savings, availability of loans, etc., Health- availability and access of health services, mental health conditions, the status of women affected by HIV/AIDS, minor ailments, etc., Govt. Services- availability of ration, availability of doctors at PHCs, access to schemes such as free gas cylinders, etc. Saheli has documented a few case stories of sex workers that reflect the impact of pandemic lockdown on the lives and livelihoods of the Sex Workers.

Covid Impact Survey

Saheli conducted a Covid Impact Survey in the Budhwar area. The findings of the survey are as follows:

The survey primarily reflected that sex worker suffered due to pandemic lockdown. They lost work, therefore they had to live on the savings that soon exhausted. Some of them did not have enough to eat. Could not pay their rent. were forced to take a loan to survive as the local vendor refused to give them goods on credits. They have harassed the house/brothel owners as they could not pay the rent. A few who had access to ration cards and could be linked to govt. the website received free ration for all **three** months. However, it was observed that some sex workers did not have ration cards and some of those who had could not get it linked to govt. the website, therefore, did not get the privilege of the free ration. A few starved for a couple of days during the first phase of the sudden lockdown.

It was observed that a large number of women had access to public health services and received treatment from doctors. Those on ART could access it from PHCs. The medical shops were also open in their vicinity. However, there were **20%** of women did not access health care facilities due to due to unavailability of local transport or because the fare of the local transportation had tripled. Largely women went through fear and were scared of the Covid, they suffered mental trauma. and no help was received from government machinery to face the pandemic situation.

Although, in the initial phase of lockdown, not many extended their support to sex workers however later civil society began to express their kindness. It was noted that people were humane and extended their support to the sex workers. Several hands came forward to feed them. Some send them cooked meals, a few others sent dry ration.

The survey also showed that although a large number of women did not face food crises during the lockdown in the unlock phase women's problems became more severe. Although the lockdown was released the customers feared stepping in the Budhwar Peth as a result, sex workers did not earn enough to meet their needs. Whatever customers they could get paid less than their normal charges, e.g., those who charged Rs. 200/- per sitting began to accept Rs.100/- or less. A few sex workers and transgender also tried their hand in other businesses, but not many succeeded. Women who had taken loans during lockdown were being pressurized by the money lenders or friends to return their money as the markets had opened for business. But women could hardly survive on their meager income. They struggled for basic needs such as house rent, cylinder, etc.

The non-brothel-based women struggled for their daily needs. Some of these women who stayed on the outskirts of the city were affected gravely as it was difficult to send them any kind of support. Neither, Saheli nor other donors could reach them. They lived on a rent basis so the landlord expected them to pay back the pending rent and had begun pressurizing them.

Children became added on to their daily expenses. After lockdown, children who lived in hostels were sent home. Women had to manage their expenses in their limited resources, plus post lockdown they were unable to attend to customers due to lack of space.

4. As a partner of the National Network of Sex Workers, Saheli had actively promoted and advocated the sex worker's rights as informal workers to the National Human Rights Commission. Along with other national organizations, it had voiced its perspective on sex worker's struggle and their rights in the local print media as well as social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It had also published handbills to build public awareness of the human rights of sex workers.

5. **Covid Relief Work**

Throughout the Covid 19, pandemic lockdown period Saheli appealed for support from the local donors and has raised a considerable amount of support during this period. The donors have come forward and provided ready-to-eat meal packets, dry ration, and other essential kits to the sex workers. Saheli has taken a key role in the distribution of this support and reached more than 1000 sex workers. The support has been provided in six rounds and it continues to make rounds to date.

6. Along with the Key Population Group India and as a member of the National Network of Sex Workers Saheli was involved in rounds of community consultations, surveys, and negotiations to get a GFATM emergency grant for the key population. This was a historic moment where all seven networks of the key population in India came together and achieved success to get 10 million dollars for key populations including sex workers.

Lesson learned

- ✳ Saheli had realized that sex workers were not safe in their own homes. They could be easily harassed and arrested for soliciting, although they do not flout laws.
- ✳ We learned that awareness was the key to empower the sex workers.
- ✳ Sensitization on the fundamental rights of sex workers and awareness of the police authorities and officials was essential as not many were aware of the Bombay Police Act, 1951 as well as.

- ✳ Enhancement of organizational strength by collaborating with other organizations was also found essential.
 - ✳ Social media campaigns an essential tool of advocacy.
 - ✳ Saheli advocated to stop violence and deprivation of sex workers and to treat them as human beings. It fortified a need to protect the human rights of women who were in sex work.
7. **One Billion Rising:** Saheli participated in the campaign staged by the global forum One Billion Rising (OBR). In the Indian chapter several organizations and political parties, such as National Congress Party, Congress Party, Shivasena, Communist, Shetkari Kamgar Paksh etc... came together to raise their voice against all forms of violence prevalent in societies. Saheli strongly presented their statements against the Bombay Police Act and police harassment in the press conference organized by OBR.
 8. **Constitution Day:** On 26th January. Saheli Sangha shared the information about Bombay Police Act, the reality in implementation and demands on various forums on the occasion of constitution day.
 9. **Savitribai Phule Jayanti:** Stree Mukti Sanghatana invited on the occasion of Savitribai Phule Jayanti. Saheli to speak on the conditions in which sex workers live and the legal issues they encounter. On this occasion, several other women's groups were also present.
 10. **Women and Child Welfare Department:** National Network of Sex Workers conducted Covid Impact Survey. The survey focused on the issues sex workers faced during the Covid-19 lockdown period. WCD noticed the issue and distributed ration and some monetary help to women.
 11. **Help Desk:** Help Desk is an outcome of the Covid 19 Economic Impact Survey and the Rise up the project. The result of the survey showed that due to the unavailability of the documents sex workers could not be benefitted from the government schemes. About 50% of women were deprived due to the absence of identity proof. Therefore, the National Network of Sex Workers started the Help Desk to help women get identity proof to help them access the benefits of the govt. schemes.
 12. Two days workshop on Advocacy against Violence for Justice was organized to promote the concept of the Help Desk. About 31 representatives of the organizations of Maharashtra working with the sex workers participated on this occasion.

This workshop was organized in collaboration with the National Network of Sex workers, a State-Level Workshop held in Pune. The workshop discussed the Bombay Police Act, Covid-19, and issues related to lockdown. Mr. Suraj Pol guided participants on the do's & don'ts while accessing their identity proof documents like Adhar card, Pan card, Ration card, etc.

It was observed that police harass women for not providing identity proof documents. Generally, it is observed that the reason why sex workers do not have any essential documents to prove their identity is that they lose their association with their family or village after entering sex work. Thus they remain deprived of government schemes such as housing schemes, pension, and school scholarships for children, medical help, etc.

13. Saheli organized a one-day training program was organized on the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA 1956) and the Bombay Police Act, 1951. About 30 representatives of different NGOs from Maharashtra took advantage of this training. Resource persons such as Suresh Pol, Mandakini Bhadane were invited to speak.

The implementation of the ITPA Act: Police harassment is a common feature in the red lights areas. However, ITPA gave them an additional reason to inflict violence and harass the brothel owners and sex workers. They had begun to forcefully arrest sex-workers under the Act. This approach is common at the state level.

The brothel owners & sex workers are aware of the Act and prevent minor girls from entering sex work. Soon after the lockdown phase, police raided brothels and the red-light area as the rescue operation. Women were terrorized and were scared to step out of the house. A few began leaving the area or moving out briefly.

Therefore, the National Network of Sex workers and Human Rights and Law network have come together to validate sex worker's rights and have succeeded in rescuing a few women from police custody. After a fallout of this action, the members of the networks appealed to the Maharashtra Police Authority to consider the matter and stop the violence and the misinterpretation of the ITPA and BPA act.

The networks appealed to the authorities to act sensitively towards sex workers post lockdown as they are merely struggling to survive like others. Therefore, they need to be respected and treated with dignity and extended support.

14. **The Bombay Police Act, 1951**

Sex workers were arrested/apprehended or booked under Bombay Police Act, 1951 Sec 56 and section 57 and sections of Bombay Prohibition Act, 1949, Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, 1956. The sex workers could remove themselves from the area or pay a fine. The fixed amount of fine rupees 500, varies in practice and the police officers charge different fines.

Apprehensions and charges against women under the Bombay Police Act 1951 continued after COVID 19. The women were impacted by this as the lockdown had put them in a financial crunch. The apprehensions and fine charges also create fear and terror among sex workers.

Therefore, Saheli organized the National Level Consultation on the Bombay Police Act section 110 and 117, but because of Covid 19 lockdown, the consultation couldn't take hold. Strategically, the one-day state-level workshop was organized to discuss the present status and appeal processes under BPA and ITPA.

15. Impact of Advocacy: How many women or girls will be or are impacted by this advocacy win and how exactly are they impacted? Why is this significant?

These activities impacted more than 3000 sex workers in Pune and almost 3.5 lacs nationwide.

- * The pieces of evidence helped in establishing the fact that the Police force uses the Act to harass the female sex workers and charge them fines. They felon them on the false case of soliciting in the public places and fine them as per their whims. Therefore, such an act was detrimental to the human rights of sex workers.
- * NHRC released guidelines on sex work as informal sector workers, under which they were entitled to get all the facilities and schemes of the government.
- * It helped in building public awareness and establishes a dialogue on social media.
- * It helped in building solidarity with the National Networks of NGOs working on sex worker's issues.
- * Covid 19 pandemic helped in changing the outlook of the police force towards sex workers. It was noted that they treated sex workers as humans and had a kind approach towards them. There was no incidence of violence or police atrocities during the lockdown period. No sex workers or brothels have been raided from March 2019 to December 2020. Now they started booking women under the BPA and ITPA

16. Did you have any important learnings or shifts you had to make to your initial strategy/objective/EARs?

- * Advocacy of Human Rights was an important struggle for an organization to protect its community, more so sex workers.
- * Continued to support NNSW in promoting and advocating the sex worker's human rights and support the National Human Rights Commission's guidelines of sex work as an informal work.

Key Challenges faced throughout the project implementation?

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown, Saheli could not reach the Director-General of Police to pass an order to all local police stations to exclude sex workers from BPA 110-117 relating to indecent behavior of obscenity in a public place.

During Covid 19 pandemic lockdown period, **the** Saheli team was completely focused on relief work and raising funds to help sex workers survive through the difficult times.

Below mentioned activities planned but because of Covid lockdown, activities couldn't take place.

1. To build awareness on the rights of the community workshops and awareness campaigns with the community were planned in the next quarter/six months.
2. Saheli will further, gather more information and evidence of police atrocities and harassment on women sex workers.
3. A Social Media campaign would be organized in collaboration with two or more Law Colleges. It would aim at reaching out to the youth community.
4. Strengthen our rapport with DLSA. Similarly, train community para-legal volunteers to implement a need-based program.
5. Organize State level consultation with partner organizations from Maharashtra to form a Project Coalition and reach out to the large section of the community and garner their support. Organized state level workshop with partner organizations
6. Conduct advocacy workshops with the high-ranking officers in the Maharashtra Police Department and State Commission of Women to repeal the Bombay Police Act.

Saheli will take up these issues, processes, and activities once the things normalize in the red light area.

